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Ontologies: Inquiries into Existence

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ONTOLOGIES:
Inquiries into Existence

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School
of Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Art

by
Alexandra Zita Giannell
May 2015

Accepted by:
Professor Todd McDonald, Committee Chair
Professor Kathleen Thum
Dr. Beth Lauritis
Dr. Andrea Feeser

ABSTRACT

It is through our body which we experience life, rooted in physicality and sensation. Essentially residing in an object-oriented world, we are at the mercy of things constituting one another, shaping our identity. Therefore, self is a byproduct of our experiences, never fixed, but in fact, always in flux, dependent upon the body as the intermediary between self and object, grounding us in this physical world. My work allows me a venue in which I hone in on the body as a tool.

Incorporating ritualized processes into my studio practice is paramount in aiding my inquiries of bodily existence, as they are modes I deliberately function within. Exploring how the mark can communicate and dictate conversations of physicality, producing a varied yet specific language in which I am able to visually operate. This has provided a foundation for the thinking behind the approach and execution of my own bodies of works, including *The Mass and Void Series*, *The Dead Body Series*, *The Weight of Doubt Series*, and *The Lost at Sea Series*.

Each series concerns the employment of my mark as it links to the understanding of the viewing and making body in space and beyond, ranging from small scale to large, utilizing variations of the mark both embellished and reconsidered. This body of work speaks to self-situation, in one place, over a period of time, embodying the act of becoming— a process in which we are all undergoing.

DEDICATIONS

I dedicate this research to the seekers and obtainers of knowledge—may this body of work encourage you to stop, reconsider, and relinquish to what *is*.

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Thank you Clyde Fowler, Pamela Griffin, Greg Shelnutt, Maja Godlewska, Susan Brenner, Dr. Jae Emerling, and Jamie Franki for instilling in me your passion and knowledge of art. I am deeply indebted to you all for your guidance over the years.

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I would like to thank my family for their love and support in my many endeavors.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE INQUIRY

Being in the body is the only mode of existing we know. It is our worldly mechanism, a deeply complex system in which we are bound. It is through our body which we experience life, rooted in physicality and sensation. Essentially residing in an object-oriented world, we are at the mercy of “things” constituting one another, shaping our identity. Therefore, “self” is a byproduct of our experiences, never fixed, but in fact, always in flux, dependent upon the body as the intermediary between self and object, grounding us in this physical world. My work allows me a venue in which I hone in on the body as a tool -- our tool—to understanding the possibilities of residing in it, while also humbly becoming acutely aware of its limitations as our vehicle.

My first attempt to explore the possibilities of the body, sharpening my own tool for a deeper awareness, included surrendering to the ancient practice of yoga. Yoga is a physical, mental, and spiritual practice used for healing and seeking enlightenment, investigating the union between mind and body. This practice, along with most religious and healing-based practices, is experienced through ritualized acts, aiming to alter or enhance our being in our body. Yoga is specifically ritualized through *asanas*, or poses, viewed as prayers, engaging, stimulating, and challenging both the body and the mind. A continually mindful practice of these poses literally opens the body to a new range of physical possibilities while also broadening and sensitizing the relationship of being tied to the body. The yogic journey aims to navigate these mental and physical waters, stripping away pretenses, self-defining experiences, and what we think we know.

Engaging with the ritual-based nature of yoga allows me to study the roles of ritual, pronounce in everyday life as well as in elevated events. Transcending mere acts, the power of the ritual is self-assigned and deliberate, defined by our expectations of the execution, aiming to yield results which are specific and not haphazard, empowering self-situation, shaping our existential beliefs. We choose to engage with these agents that factor in to the constitution of our being, as they stimulate and satisfy matters of residing in the body.

Incorporating ritualized processes into my studio practice is paramount in aiding my inquiries of bodily existence, as they are modes I deliberately function within, exploring how the mark can communicate and dictate conversations of physicality. My processes often revolve around repetitive acts of bodily restraints, producing a varied yet specific language of marks in which I am able to visually operate. I participate within these physical and theoretical limitations, engaging their boundaries, pushing beyond the frame.

These conversations I set up in my work, highly informed by my yoga practice, are also curiously invested in an array of thinkers. I find my concerns with being in the body are fed by metaphysical theorist Jane Bennett, anthropological French thinker Pascal Boyer, French theorist Gilles Deleuze, and most importantly Jacques Derrida and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Considering the logistics of being in the body, I turn to Merleau-Ponty, as he discusses the power of the flesh as a bridging mechanism. He claims self-formation occurs by means of embodiment through object-orientation, reiterating that our flesh,

cloaking the self, is our vehicle to becoming, acting as a force that connects and simultaneously separates. This thinking suggests one grounded by a place, time, and object, yet continuously in flux, where self-realization is constant.

Derrida offers a perspective contrary yet supplementary to this, leaving his reader – my viewer—displaced, also in flux, yet not bound by orientation and location. He argues the cyclical act of deconstruction as a means of progression, insight, and rebirth, leaving one in the empowered state of rebuilding. Derrida's thinking poses the otherwise nihilistic notion of deconstruction in a positive light, claiming the act allows for a deeper consideration and understanding of structure in doing, un-doing, and redoing.

These theories link back to the yoga process, wherein one must intentionally engage with the act of self-transformation, shedding layers and essentially deconstructing self in order to remain open to reformation and reconstruction. This encourages my own notions of becoming, informing formal and process-based decisions in my work as I dabble between visual suggestions of formation and deconstruction of self. Though not all of these thinkers centralize their writing and discussions around the body, the interweaving of these thoughts provide copious pastures in which to explore existence.

My mark has hopes of extending beyond myself, riding its indexical qualities, seeking to gain sustenance from the marks surrounding it, not from me. This mark does not come from a place of assertion and assignment; it comes from a place which is malleable and flexible, stating only to retract or restate. My process is what links yet distances me, relinquishing my own desires to ritual, while also retaining my presence in the work.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MASS AND VOID SERIES

My *Mass and Void Series* bears a resemblance to the late Ana Mendieta's *Body Tracks* pieces. Mendieta produced several of these works over a period of time beginning in 1974, both on paper and the wall, often incorporating smears of red paint. To create these pieces she centrally aligned her body with her support, dragging her hands downward, leaving a simple yet powerful trace of her concentrated bodily movements. Her traces, though produced under a different context, visually align with my own, as I, too, take on a similar process producing comparable formal results.

The process I employed utilized tests of reach, exploring spaces within my physical means, seeing how far my body will allow me to go, defining the edge of my physicality. Such edges are defined by the reach our limbs-- the extensions of our body, elements which seek sensation. These receptors allow for rich intake, however, they, too, encounter a limited accessibility.

Record of my bodily limitations can be seen in this series, as I use the raw physicality of the white paint, mimicking the movements and extensions of my limbs from a centrally stabilized position in front of the support (Fig. 1.1 & 1.2). These traces embody the making of self, bound in a specific place, time and space, suggesting the limits and expanse of my physicality. These marks are large, expressive, and immediate, filled with a sense of urgency, capturing the curiosity of attainable and unattainable space.

This space is dependent upon location of being or making. I intentionally incorporate symmetry in the making of each piece, aligning my body with the center of the page, encouraging a sense of balance, translating the structure of my own body to that of the viewer. This mirroring effect provides a specific location for situating the viewing body as well as our vision, whereas future works explore leaving the viewer dislocated, place-less, gaze meandering. With these factors, I aim to align the body of the viewer with my own situated making, and more specifically, my own centrality. Achieving this symmetry demands use of both hands and, therefore, both sides of the brain, forcing the making process to be fully immersive, bringing a keen awareness to the body in space. This incorporation to relinquish a certain control is intentional, stripping my making process of dominance, handed-ness, and a sensibility to render. This allowed for full-body engagement, pulling away from rationalization and products of the mind, solely focusing on the body in relation to space.

Undergoing this process bears a product housing the traces of these ritualized behaviors, revealing the visual question of “what” remains after ritual. After one participates in articulated regiments, reforming self, what is left of that ritualized experience? What is left is the index, naked and stripped of formality. These indexical remains become potent in the viewing, as the visual experience is dictated by retracing my bodily movements through space, an act that may seem familiar as our bodies are similarly constructed mobile vehicles. It is this bodily understanding that links us, allowing for a juxtaposition of body to body, presence to presence. This essentially allows the viewer to insert himself or herself as the marker, offering this sense of

interchangeability, allowing the work to become less about who I am as a maker, but the role of my body – *the body, anyone's body*—in the making process, or in the process of becoming.

This reflective quality and inherent accessibility of the work is simply a doorway to a larger, underlying agenda; more discretely embedded in the index is the inescapable absence of presence. The ritualized marks suggest a presence that was once there, forcing the process of interacting with the support to become a thing of the past -- a relic, even. These pieces begin to function as remnants of movement within ritualized behavior, proof of the self as it is in flux. The past-tense nature of these actions aim to prompt consideration of physical presence as well as potential absence or cessation.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DEAD BODY SERIES

Upon exploring large marks informed by the range of my bodily movements, I found it necessary to also engage in a more physically limited mode of mark-making, transitioning from an emphasis on physical movement to mental consideration. Both in the making and in the viewing, the large marks truly demand an awareness of the body in space. This series employs small-scale gestures, however, taking the overt bodily presence out of the equation by means of both the scale of the support and the form created. These forms are compilations of subtle smudges, marks, and erasure, forcing a certain intimacy in the viewing, calling for consideration beyond the body, as they are no longer relatable on a human scale.

These miniature drawings aim to displace our understanding of our physicality, sending us into a mental realm or headspace (Fig. 2.1-2.7). This non-physical space is one where our mind dominates and determines, less informed by the actuality of our physicality, geared toward how we think about being and what we presume will come of us.

Our fate is undeterminable. Boyer claims such self-reflexive notions were bore in response to the agency of the dead body, triggering our mental systems to digest the inanimate, recognizable, and relatable flesh, opening doors to large considerations of personal destiny and what is to come. Tuning in to Boyer's thinking, I consider how to deconstruct an image of a dead body in my own work, transforming it in to something familiar but not in a physical state.

I began incorporating this thinking into my choice of materials, considering the materiality and lifecycle of my support—the paper. I referred back to the *whole*—the tree—which I then chopped and burned. This process produced a very hard charcoal, capable only of very light lines, and ash, lending to the delicacy of smudging. With these materials, I then approached the *whole* again, activating the materials with my hands over the surface of one large piece of paper, a layer suggesting a subtle bodily presence. I also incorporated kneading in my own saliva as another indexical element to bind the materials to the paper, allowing for permanence and immutability in areas.

The next step involved tearing the large piece into smaller, equal segments, furthering them with utensils, determining composition in response to the existing indexical marks. This layer of tighter, controlled line from the pencil is a less organic layer, slightly contrived and imagined, referring to our romanticized depictions of what is to come. This layer is dangerous in that it flirts with image and illusion, slightly overshadowing the index and physicality, speaking to our envisioning of our bodily transition.

These images present us with just that—an intimate, romanticized image of forms in transition-- dispersing, disappearing, approaching death, the void, the unknown. These forms are rendered with a certain level of physical relatability through structural elements, patterns, and textures informed by road kill, architecture, spider webs, bodies of water, and, of course, our own bone structure and bodily systems. These physical clues ground our understanding and tie us to reality, tangibility, and what we assume we know, as they become familiar, relatable, and newly relevant to our viewing body. These

inclusions offer detailed, specific information, differing dramatically from the open, white void coinciding with it.

This void-- or the epitome of what we do not know, or what is to come—can be recognized as the large, white areas of negative space, extending into the form, disrupting its structure, taunting its core. This idea of the void first captured my attention with the works of Cy Twombly, as he introduces the power of the white wash, giving an importance to visual nothingness and the unknown. In his series *Poems to the Sea* from 1959, he uses the white wash to erase, omit, and restate fields of mark making and writing. This act specifically speaks to the inaccessibility of knowledge through language as a modern construct. Additionally, many of his sculptures from the late 1980's onward into the early 2000's are bathed in whiteness, swallowing the re-appropriated forms, allowing for a unification and anonymity of the object.

In my works, these pools of white coincide with the more calculated forms, embodying a non-physical space, untouched, and not rationalized. Its presence emphasizes the fragile, intangible, and illusive qualities of these seemingly concrete bodies. This unknown space rivals the becoming of the bodies, entering them, weaving through them, piercing them, instilling a larger consideration of what is not concrete and what cannot be concluded.

I incorporate this as my third layer to these pieces through acts of erasure, embodying the instability of our questioning attempts at understanding life beyond physicality, working and reworking the surface, restating and retracting my marks, in a sense admitting that I, too, do not know. This erasure interrupts the indexical marks and

deconstructs the previously rendered marks, and, therefore, reconstructs a less-assumed body, one that is penetrated by the unknown, freed from the ties of knowledge. This juxtaposition of what we know and what we do not know calls upon moments where the two mesh; the moment of ambiguity, unsustainability, and fluctuation. This is evident in moments of subtlety, as the form meets the void, edges dissipating and fading into something less concrete and structural, suggesting a transition of being.

This dichotomy addresses my personal concern for conceiving and grasping the very moment we leave our body and enter the next state of existence. This is a moment, which cannot be pre-discovered, informed only by our own assumptions of what is to come, assuredly varying from what actually is. Therefore, our previous prescriptions are now non-knowledge, as the void is given precedence, essentially contending with and consuming what we believe we know. These works intend to compare and marry our earth-bound knowledge with the uncertainty of afterlife, suggesting the role of process in our own becoming and enlightenment.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WEIGH OF DOUBT SERIES

The delicacy of my previous drawings in *The Dead Body Series* embraces a process of buildup and erasure. This inspired *The Weight of Doubt Series*, which embraces layering, abandoning erasure, attempting to obliterate the image through accumulation (Fig. 3.1-3.5). I began these works on a very large scale, once again directing an awareness of the body in space, emphasizing the magnitude of the support, and therefore, the buildup of my mark. Some pieces explore a central location in the making, while others investigate the periphery. Either way, the process begins from indexical marks made by my medium-drenched hands, only to be swallowed by layers to come.

Still invested in the indexical mark and less concerned with the act of retraction, I explore the cumulative weight of the marks as statements. This mass application pulls away from the play of knowing and not knowing as it does not allow for a sense of removal, but rather restates through additions. The “thingness” of these forms does not suggest the search for understanding as works had previously; instead, they suggest the extent of what may occur from stagnant thinking. Doubts, accrued, can manifest physically, mentally, and emotionally. This body of work explores bringing this powerful manifestation to fruition visually, presenting an experience of sensation, one where we are able to feel and relate to this thinking as a thing. Because it is our physicality, which grounds our existence, it is the presence of “thingness” which can stir up how we understand our reality.

Bennett, invested in the studies of metaphysics, poses theoretical discussions of thingness, questioning whether the “thing-power” is innate to the object, or if it is self-prescribed. Objects are loaded agents, essentially mirroring our bodies, and in turn, our associations of selfhood. Bennett also discusses the power of the thing in the hoard, wherein hoarders essentially lose and gain both control and an identity to the collection and act of collecting, as their hoard envelopes them as an entrapping, threatening presence. This act of obsessive collecting or adding leaves no room retraction, deletion, or even consideration.

This act is not progressive or enlightening, therefore the pieces become overly confident and aggressive, housing forms with a weight and a flesh-like density, looming, suggesting a brooding external energy that perhaps cannot be escaped -- a malignant tumor. These looming forms intend to meet the viewer with an adjacent agenda, whilst also exuding a sense of predation. These forms puts the void at risk, as there is less concern for honing in on the unknown, and only a care for the known, embodying a potential outcome of doubting or believing, becoming internal markers of self, indicative of how we perceive existence.

I find works by Nancy Rubins also play with a similar illusion of weight and consideration of the body encountering looming presences. Rubins’ velvety black drawings are displayed both on the wall and as objects in space, becoming sculptural voids of depth. Many of her massive, re-appropriated sculptures consist of objects—in this case, toys—constructed and clustered to hover as a cumulative mass. She creates this weight in both her use of dark value and in large scale. Her investment in visual weight

speaks to my own agenda in this series of works, as I, too, am trying to achieve a quality of heaviness and density, marrying value and scale, achieving forms which fluctuate between thing and space.

To do so, this visual weight calls for meaty mediums—juicy, thick, rich—forcing me to invest in lush materials to intensify the product. To achieve repulsive yet resonating surfaces I work with rigorously layering marks with both hands, spraying inks and paints, and unapologetically slathering acrylics and oils, varnishes and sheens. Skin-like surfaces begin to refer to the physical presence of a thing, while ephemeral mists or washes of colors offer a spatial read.

On one end, this layering process is physically exhausting, forcing me aggressively slather paint on more-than-human scales. On the other end, smaller scales allow for an introspective process, allowing me to hone in on the edge, departing from physicality; this is the moment when you—self—comes to a head, propelling into the space beyond you. Naturally, this visual weight translates on a large scale more easily than the small, forcing me to challenge how I use the supports. The small pieces became building blocks, allowing for small moments of weight to be reconsidered, reorganized, and structured, allowing for orchestration similar to writing where one places words within sentences. This curation, I find, lends more of my hand than I would usually prefer; however, for this series, this extra control lent itself to the nature of the over-statement.

The visual weight and intimidating scale of the larger works in relation to the body enhance the agenda of the marks, as they do not intend to be altered or swayed. The

deliberation of the marks iterates our attempts at knowledge and intellectualization, ultimately falling short, perhaps aiding in our downfall. A believer, or one who feels they know, is the same as the doubter, or one who admits he does not know. How we choose to talk about something does not ultimately refer to what actually is, but rather what we believe it to be; however, what actually *is* will *be* regardless of our agenda. Therefore, repetitive, unchanging thinking, or, the accumulation of assured knowledge or doubt, can be a detrimental factor in our understanding of our mortality.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE LOST AT SEA SERIES

My most recent series of works are inspired by Twombly's paintings consisting of layered writing, washing over the entire support, permeating, vibrating, and graying out into illegibility. This can be seen in *Nini's Painting's* from 1971, where mark-making and writing merge into a field of gesture penetrating the surface, suggesting the expanse of space rather than depth. Frederick Sommer's photographs also explore a similar space in *Arizona*, 1976, which seem flat, denying perspective, becoming a surface of texture. I am most compelled by Twombly and Sommers, as they both mutilate our understanding of space, presenting us with reformed, flattened fields, expansive yet shallow, created by the layers and mass-information of the visual and written languages. My intentions are to create pieces which do so through the simplicity of line, rarely employing color, trimming away formal flab.

Also highly influencing this series are the reoccurring relationships between mass and void, thing and non-thing, knowledge and the inconceivable. Exploring thing and non-thing also lends itself to considering space, and, in the work thus far, the void has been made present through whiteness and erasure, suggesting an enterable space. This series aims to take our dimensional, linear, perspective-bound understanding of space and twist it, offering the viewer a sensational experience, one which explores surface and atmospheric realms (Fig. 4.1-4.3). These flat surfaces simulate a spatial tension, undulating and receding, humming as the marks rhythmically confuse and penetrate our vision, parading as something to be entered, to swim in.

Previous processes involved adding, editing, subtracting; this system of marking does not reconsider or restate—it builds and expands-- forcing the maker to relinquish to the process as it tests the endurance for being present in the moment. This form of image-building calls for a sense of urgency and continuity, producing a fittingly expansive image where the rhythmic iterations pump ethereal energies mimicking waves of sounds or movement of seas, intending to encompass the viewer, entrapping and entangling them. This sense of movement and structure can be found in Deleuze's thinking. He takes this idea of transition, migration, and growth of the nomad, and presents the idea of rapid self-expansion with his theories of the rhizome. This discussion of rhizomatic expansion points to a singularity within multiplicity as well as structure yielding chaos.

These boundless spaces are executed with a very particular, limited line. This short, staccato, tick mark is basic, easily grasped, grounded by many references to language and image making. This concept can be seen present in cave painting, alphabets, and graffiti, which literally means “to scratch onto the wall” in Italian. Line is a visual tool of thought, attempting representation, communication, and preservation. Line is also a staple in art making as our most basic yet complex tool, one which I attempt to strip of formality in order to build formally driven product.

I build these endless realms utilizing line in a different way than before, giving each mark its own distinct presence and resonance as I situate them side by side, one never overlapping or cancelling another, spaced, and hatched. I adopt these simple marks as my only mode of marking, flirting with obsession, madness, and redundancy. Rows of

altered marks are intertwined and stacked, tilted and twirled, executed at the fastest pace possible, anxiousness flooding the making. It is the subtle variations of the line-- the twist of the wrist, the pressure, and the glide—which create nuances structuring the entirety of the image. The sequential building of the marks informs the intensity of vibration and penetration of the surface, becoming texturally descriptive, permeating the support, extending beyond the frame.

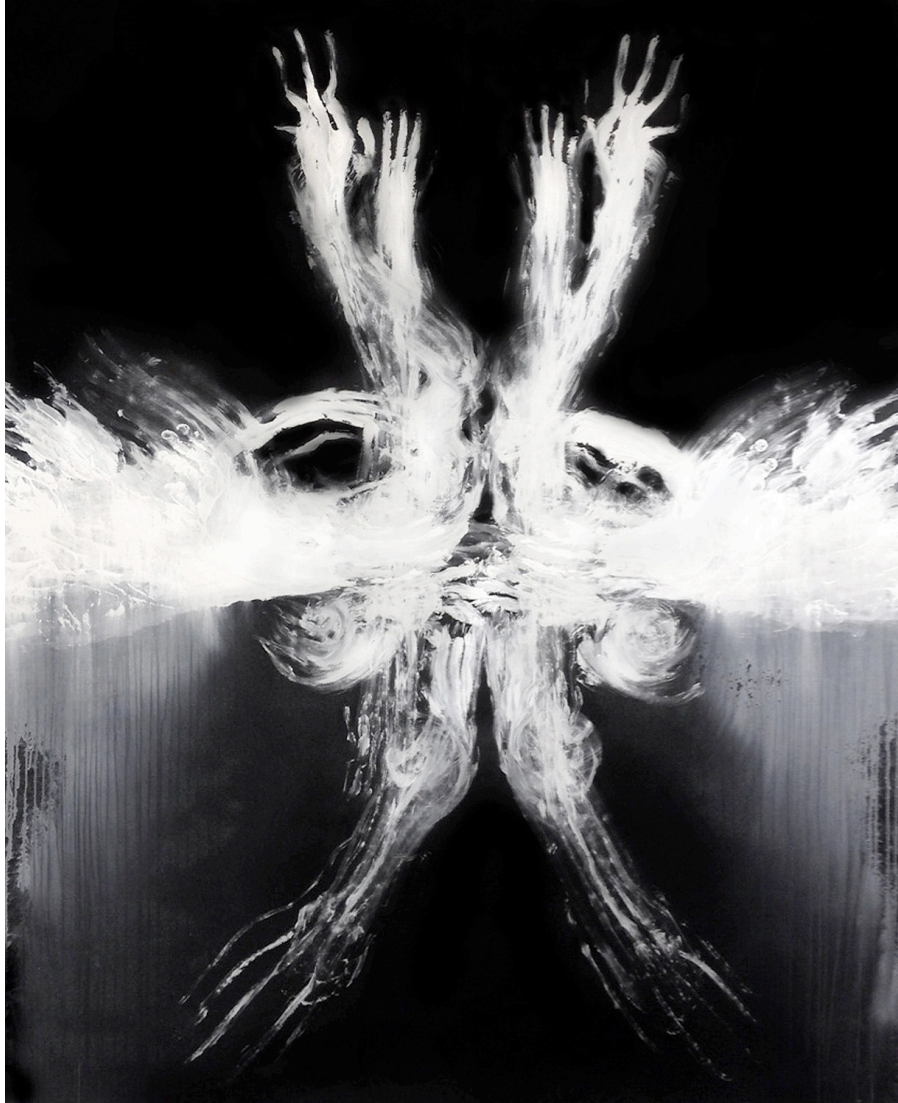
The body, as it experiences these pieces, it is confronted by an expansive force, pulling, pushing, and prodding at our sensations and physicality. While nuances call for the eye to linger and meander, the pulsation may proceed to induce spatial confusion, and perhaps nausea. Additionally, these works hope to visually mesmerize, hypnotize, disassociate, and consume, aiming to trap the viewer in a headspace.

Beyond the illusive qualities and sensational effect of these realms is the accessibility and digestibility of my process and execution. This intentional element allows the process to be read, with the indexical mark multiplied, the final product is telling of lengthy bodily involvement during the making, speaking to self-situation, in one place, over a period of time, embodying the act of becoming.

CONCLUSION

These works are progressive, building off of one another, making the next step and alteration to further my inquiry. They have been sifting through what we know and what we do not, touching down in several locations of being. The progression of the work has in fact led to less conclusive thinking, wherein one gives in to this constant state of not knowing what is to come, instead of achieving knowledge and certainty. This body of work does not attempt to find or produce answers; rather, it explores venues and modes of inquiry as potential means of existence, setting them in dialogue, expanding on the complexities of our questioning.

FIGURES



1.1 *Body-Bound I, The Mass and Void Series*
Acrylic on paper, 70x57", 2014



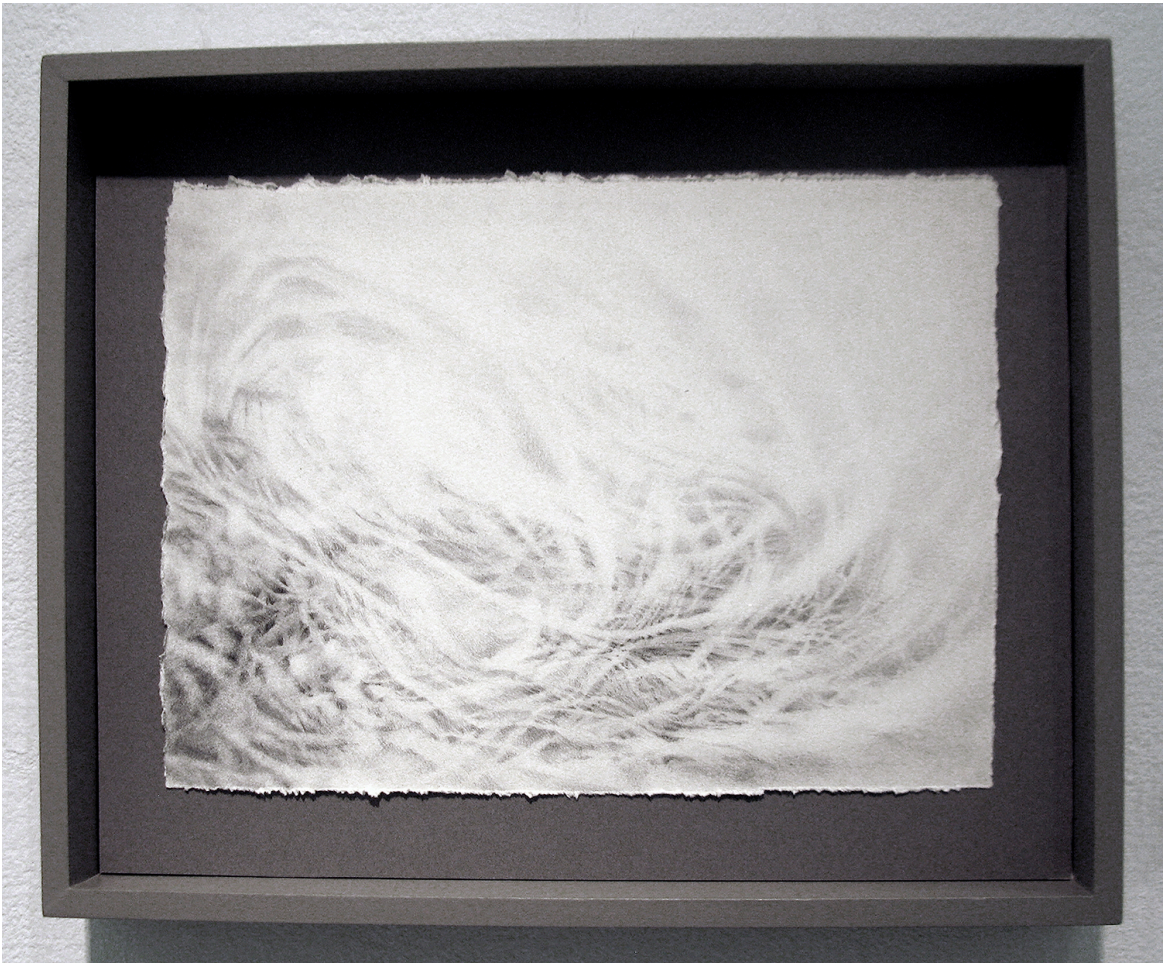
1.2. *Body-Bound II, The Mass and Void Series*
Acrylic on paper, 70x57", 2014



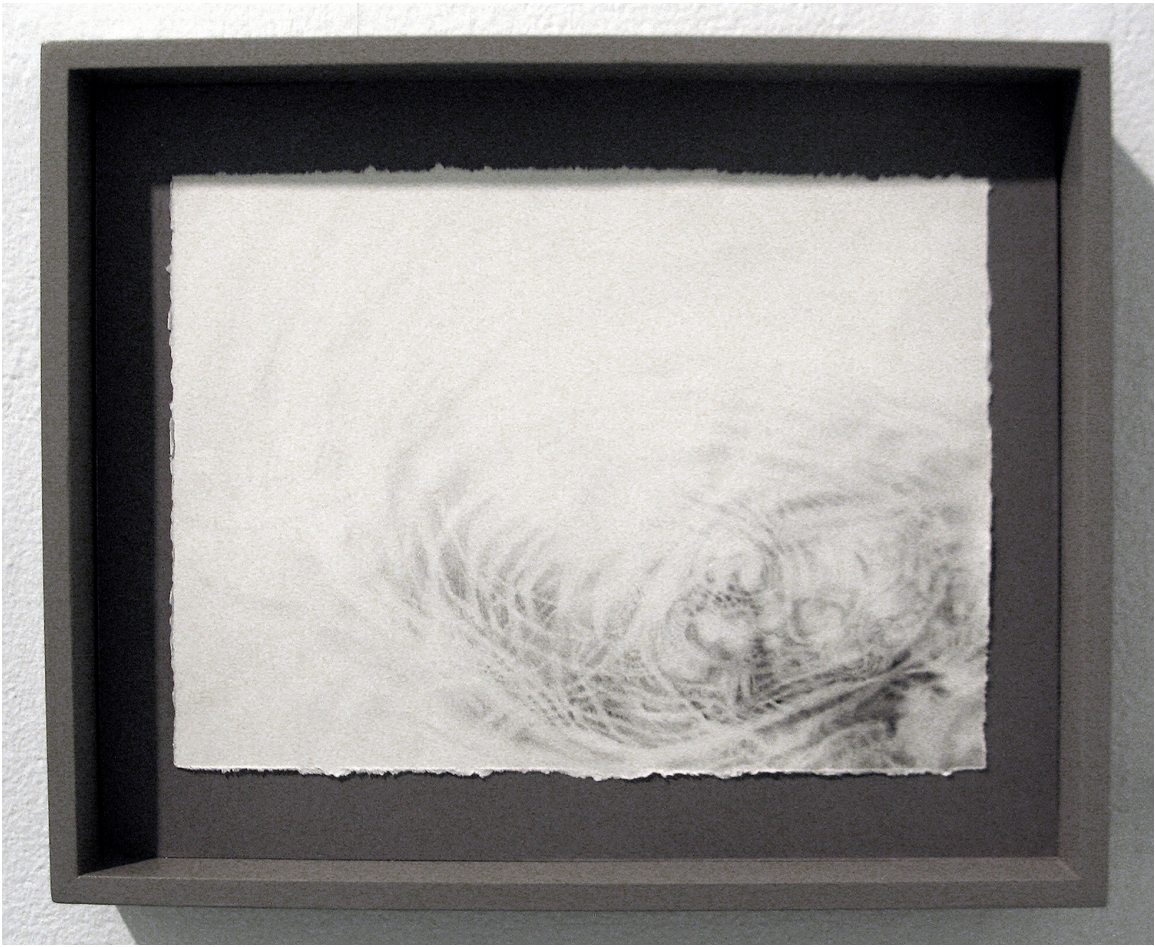
2.1 *Death Canal, The Dead Body Series*
Graphite and ash on paper, 17x13x3", 2014.



2.2 *Rhizomatic Expansion, The Dead Body Series*
Graphite and ash on paper, 17x13x3", 2014.



2.3 Fluxuation, The Dead Body Series
Graphite and ash on paper, 13x16x3", 20



2.4 Planar Existence, The Dead Body Series
Graphite and ash on paper, 13x16x3", 2014.



2.5 Growth of the Ghost, The Dead Body Series
Graphite and ash on paper, 16x13x3", 2014.



2.6 *Essence of Being, The Dead Body Series*
Graphite and ash on paper, 16x13x3", 2014.



2.7 Conception, The Dead Body Series
Charcoal, graphite, and ash on paper, 30x68", 2014.



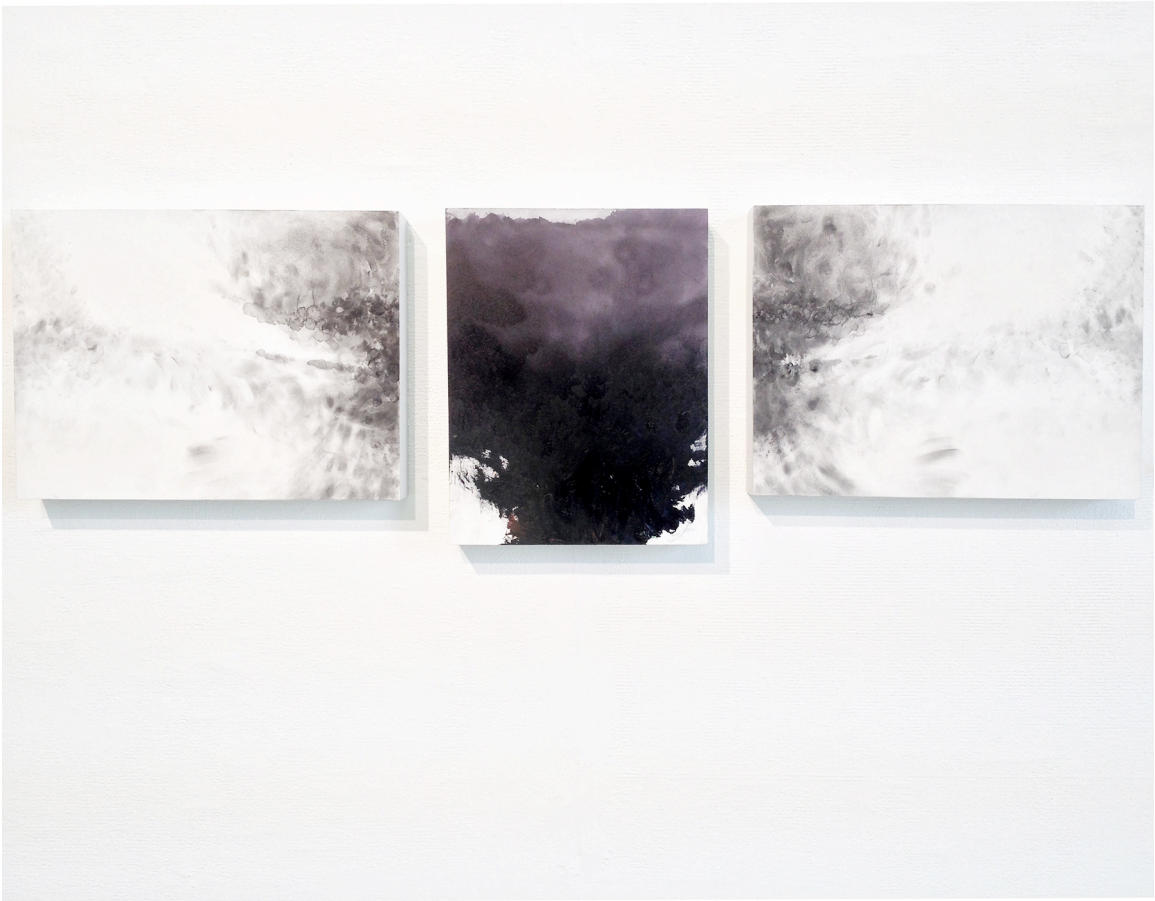
3.1 *Malignant Growth, The Weight of Doubt Series*
Mixed media on paper, 52x88", 2014.



3.2 *Consumed, The Weight of Doubt Series*
Mixed media on paper, 58x160"



3.3 *Aporia, The Weight of Doubt Series*
Mixed media on wood panels, 11x70x2", 2014.



3.4 *Cumulus, The Weight of Doubt Series*
Mixed media on wood panels, 14x43x2", 2014.



3.5 *Duality of Materiality and the Void, The Weight of Doubt Series*
Mixed media on wood blocks, 12x24x2", 2014.



4.1 *Unsettled, The Lost at Sea Series*
Graphite on paper, 50x60", 2015.



4.2 *Pulse of the Thing, The Lost at Sea Series*
Graphite on paper, 50x60", 2015.



4.3 *Canals of Curiosity, The Lost at Sea Series*
Graphite on paper, 50x51", 2015.

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